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ABSTRACT

The use of German film in four instructional contexts, based on experiences in developing a university course, is discussed. One use is as part of a German culture course taught in German, emphasizing the role of film as a cultural statement of its time, intended to be either a social criticism or a propaganda tool. A second use is integration of the film into a literature course taught in German, employing a series of television plays acquired from the Embassy of West Germany. Experience with film as part of an interdisciplinary German/journalism course offers ideas for a third use: a curriculum, offered in English, to explore a historic period or film techniques. A fourth use is as an element of a period course taught either in German or, if interdepartmental, in English, such as a course on the artistic manifestations of expressionism. (Author/MSE)

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GERMAN CINEMA AS A VEHICLE FOR TEACHING CULTURE, LITERATURE AND HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

German Cinema as a Vehicle for Teaching Culture, Literature and History.

The use of film in several different contexts will be discussed under the following sub-topics:

(1) Film as part of a German culture course, taught in German: Cinema as a cultural statement of its time, as (a) social criticism („Die freudlose Gasse," etc) or (b) a propaganda tool („Kuhle Wampe," „Triumph des Willens," etc).

(2) Film integrated into a literature course, taught in German, utilizing especially "Filmed Literature: Great authors reflect on the society of their era." (TV plays from the Embassy of the FRG).

(3) Film as course contents of an interdisciplinary German/Journalism course, offered in English, to explore an historic period (Weimar Republic, etc.) or filmic techniques (Kammerspiel, etc).

(4) Film as an element of a period course, taught either in German or, if interdepartmental, in English. Example: Expressionism in literature, film, theater, painting.

To demonstrate the various approaches to teaching German cinema in the classroom, „Der letzte Mann," 1924, and „Der blaue Engel," 1929/30, will be used as examples from among the many suitable German films of the last 60 years.

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"German Cinema as a Vehicle for Teaching Culture, Literature and History"

The history of the German Cinema from its beginnings to the present coincides with a period in German history and culture unequaled for its spectacular ups and downs, gripping drama and tragic irony. In film, recent history was preserved with little distance to the actual events, thus revealing as much about the recorded time as the time of the recording.

Except for its earliest stages around the turn of the century, the new medium soon began to attempt its own interpretation of history and literature following in its approach the artistic movements of the times, from Naturalism to Expressionism to Realism. Filmed literature continued after script writing per se had come into its own and still has an important place in cinema. After the isolating W. W. I. years with film imports from only the neutral Scandinavian countries, Germany's UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft), founded by government decree in Neubabelsberg bei Berlin in 1917, went to work. By attracting the best talent in all areas of film production, German cinema for a decade competed successfully even on the American market. It is from this point on that German film is worth studying under a variety of aspects and on several different levels.

All the possibilities had not been apparent to me until I began preparing my share of our first interdepartmental German/Journalism German Cinema course, an elective for upperclassmen in both disciplines and taught in English. The films we selected spanned the period from 1919 to 1930. Not expecting much background on the part of the students, I prepared for them a crash course in 80 years of German/European history as an introduction. The second phase of introduction was filmic, to acquaint especially non-media students with the artistic and technical means of the art.

To underscore the historic situation and to enter into the spirit of the time, we chose as the first film not the oldest but instead the 1930 WWI facit, „Im Westen nichts Neues." We did not discuss E. M. Remarque's book since we used the film strictly for background. Rejecting its past, the Germany of the Weimar Republic sought non-traditional ways of articulation in the arts. Expressionism, a pre-war movement in painting, architecture, theater and music fit the avant-garde spirit of the beginning 1920s. Before showing Expressionism in film, we

introduced the class to it in other visual arts, especially painting, in an annotated slide presentation, pointing out the artists' subjective interpretation of objective reality. Had the emphasis not been on early German cinema, an example of filmed Expressionist literature like Robert Musil's „Törless" (Volker Schlöndorff) would have been appropriate. Instead, we began a series of silent movies with Robert Wiene's „Kabinett des Doktor Caligari", 1919, followed by F. W. Murnau's „Nosferatu", 1922--both fascinating from a film technical and from a psychological point of view-- an introduction to the German preoccupation with the morbid, with inevitable, predestined doom. Pursuing this theme of unrelenting fate leading to certain destruction we showed Fritz Lang's, „Die Nibelungen Sage" after a discourse on the literature and its source in Germanic history, with the larger-than-life heroes of the 4th and 5th century Great Migration (Völkerwanderung). I have also used these two Lang films, „Siegfried", made in 1919, and „Krimhilds Rache", 1924, in a survey of German literature course where they served not only to animate an old heroic epic but showed why this literature appealed to the Romanticists who resurrected it. While these two films had a specifically German interest, another 1924 movie influenced both the German and the American cinema. A new period of German realism began with F. W. Murnau's „Der letzte Mann" ("The Last Laugh"), a Kammerspielfilm with a rather simple plot. Called in English "instinct film," the Kammerspiel (intimate theater) film was an extension of and a reaction against Expressionism. Revolutionary in Murnau's film was the nearly continuously moving or, as Carl Meyer, the script writer, called it, the "unchained" camera. Murnau's new concept created a shifting narrative perspective alternating between an objective third person narrator and a subjective first person using either his physical or his mind's eye. Despite an unmotivated farcical happy end, Hollywood style, the film served well on several levels: as a demonstration, in filmic terms of the functioning of the literary narrative process; as yet another analysis of the German character: the portrayal of the German obsession with the uniform as a mark of authority and power, here carried to the extreme of the uniform <u>being</u> the man; and to show the advent of the star phenomenon: Emil Jannings <u>is</u> the movie just as the doorman's splendid uniform <u>is</u> his character.--The next two films were chosen primarily for their social commentary and psychological street realism, charac-

teristic of the "Neue Sachlichkeit": G. W. Papst's „Freudlose Gasse" ("Joyless Street"), 1925, with Greta Garbo, and Fritz Lang's „Metropolis", 1926. Concluding the era of silent film we chose Fritz Lang's in some scientific details amazingly accurate projection, „Die Frau im Mond", 1928. The final film of the era-and the course-was Josef von Sternberg's „Der blaue Engel", made in 1929/30 and significant from several points of view: filmic treatment and transformation of literature, social commentary (a satire of the Wilhelminian bourgeois), the use of and experimentation with sound, a controversial film maker, and a new star.--The film script, "The Blue Angel" had several authors who altered substantially the original novel, „Professor Unrath", with Heinrich Mann's permission. Later, when the film had become a world success, Mann said „Mein Kopf und die Beine von Marlene Dietrich." After a first rewriting of the manuscript by Carl Zuckmayer and Karl Vollmoeller, Robert Liebmann wrote the film script and added a few scenes, before Sternberg made some final revisions. The script became an artistic product in its own right following the laws of the medium. The figure of Professor Rath is central to the film, rather than the confrontation between Rath and the city of the novel. In the "Blue Angel," Rath perishes sadly, ennobled at the last by the circumstances of his death. In the novel, he is consumed by the desire of vengeance against the town with his "50,000 enemies." He marries Rosa and flies in the face of all bourgeois conventions. Mann's ill-tempered classroom tyrant with malice toward one and all deserved the name Unrath. While Sternberg's Professor Rath is still the caricature of the authoritarian teacher and unbending guardian of morality, he is also human and because of his loneliness and unworldliness vulnerable from the outset. His fall from position and dignity to hopeless degradation and servitude evokes compassion and allows a tragic rather than a farcical ending. The reading and comparison of novel and script did not fit into the format or time frame of the film course but would lend itself equally well to a 20th century literature or a contemporary civilization course. The Viennese immigrant with an orthodox Jewish background, Jonas Sternberg - who called himself Josef von Sternberg - was a Hollywood movie maker whose dislike of the American narrative style of film making led him to develop his own style and statement. "Imitating Kammerspiel, he used lighting, décor, and minutely observed gestures to evince from nature and the human face their hidden spiritual power." "The

Blue Angel" was the only film Sternberg made in Germany where he produced it simultaneously in English and in German. It became the first real classic of sound film. Sternberg used sound as a dramaturgical, stylistic principle, not as an imitation of reality. Realizing that sound is only effective when followed by silence, that loud must be alternated with soft, he controlled it carefully, often using the device of opening and closing a door-or several doors in succession-for gradations of sound, or that of approaching and fading footsteps. Sternberg films are laden with symbols the most consistent of which is the bird, first seen in the "Salvation Hunters." In "The Blue Angel," it serves initially to give Rath his human dimension when he finds his dead canary, later, in his mortifying crowing, it gives voice to his humiliation. Lastly, there are the feathers on Lola's postcard portrait which Rath tries to peddle.--With great misgivings, Sternberg decided to give the lead to Emil Jannings, a consummate actor but one with whom he had found it difficult to work in the past. He insisted, on the other hand, on using the unknown Marlene Dietrich to play Lola, a decision that made her a star and the movie a world hit. Ironically the ascent of Dietrich marked the beginning descent of Jannings, a parallel in real life to the Lola-Professor Rath story. As for Sternberg, his place in film-making history where he ranks first to some, last to others, is still disputed. Whatever that outcome, "The Blue Angel" seems to demonstrate that despite a lifetime career in Hollywood, Sternberg belonged to the German Cinema as well. Because it is so generally known, I chose this film as an example for the many facets that may be explored in such a study. The selection and the number of films obviously depend on the purpose, the area of study into which they are integrated. To benefit students of German more, their research and term papers even in inter-departmental, taught-in-English courses could be done in German.— We have been teaching German Cinema as a once-a-week-3-hour-evening-class to allow for uninterrupted introduction, showing and subsequent discussion of a film. During the first four weeks, after the above-mentioned "briefing," we (the instructors) take turns introducing the films, preparing handouts and leading the discussion. Then teams of 2 or 3 students each are responsible for all subsequent films, following the same format. With the instructors occasionally fueling the fires of controversy, discussions seldom end on time. There is also the opportunity

for discovering and correcting misconceptions before they are perpetuated. So far, the one I am least likely to forget is of Horst Wessel, the pimp...

We are teaching film for the third time this semester and have used a different scope each fall. We called it "History of the German Cinema" the second year, beginning as before with classics of the silent era and "The Blue Angel," followed by Fritz Lang's "M," 1931 (with Peter Lorre) foreshadowing the cultural collapse of Germany. Kurt Weill's "Three-Penny-Opera" of the same year showed the lower social strata in open revolt and, Brecht once again, "Whither Germany" (Kuhle Wampe), 1932 portraying a restless, hopeless working class primed to fall victim to political exploitation. Three Leni Riefenstahl (a woman at last!) films followed, showing the genius and the ambiguity of that film maker. In "The Blue Light," 1932, a legend juxtaposing man and the mysterious forces of nature, she displayed her sensitive film making skills and acting ability in the leading role. "Triumph of the Will," her 1934 documentary masterpiece, despite the propagandistic purpose for which it was commissioned, conveyed the party spectacle's awesome spell-binding quality solely because of the masterful composition and technique of the film artist. Her 1938 film of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the 3rd Reich's grandiose self-glorification at the apex of its prestige and power also became Riefenstahl's most celebrated feat, one that has not been equaled since. For a German history or civilization course, 'Triumph' and 'Olympia' are almost indispensable to the teaching of the Nazi era. We did not search out any of the "blood and soil" films of the time (an interesting project for the future) nor did we include uninspiring 50s and early 60s post-ware fare. Instead, we concluded our history with 4 films of the New German Cinema: Rainer Fassbinder's „Angst essen Seele auf," 1973, Reinhard Hauff's „Messer im Kopf," 1978, Fassbinder's „Ehe der Maria Braun," 1979, and Volker Schlöndorff's „Die Blechtrommel," 1979. All of these show not only innovative filmic techniques, but each poses a complex of questions concerning post-war Germany and a society that is still paying a price for having survived and prospered. Comparing Günter Grass' „Blechtrommel" to Volker Schlöndorff's rather faithful interpretation (except for eliminating the narrator) would be an ambitious project

for a literature class. For a civilization course, the film would be an effective follow-up for "Triumph."

Our third and current course is entitled "The New German Cinema." Once again, we felt the need for some background to establish some sense of the immediate past. For sheer contrast in „Vergangenheitsbewältigung," we chose Helmut Kautner's "The Devil's General," 1955, an unsuccessful attempt to come to terms with all past sins at once, and Wolfgang Petersen's „Das Boot," 1981 which relates a WWII story of almost universal validity. Against this background, we outlined the growth of The New German Cinema analizing films by Fassbinder, Schlöndorff, Hauff and Herzog. After "Despair" (based on a Nabokov novel), „Ali," „Maria Braun" and „Bremer Freiheit," 1972, all by Fassbinder, we used Peter Handke's „Die linkshändige Frau," 1977/78 to compare it to the other two films about women, „Maria Braun" and „Bremer Freiheit" to discover how women struggling for identity and independence fare in German films made by men. For a study specifically of German women in contemporary society, Fassbinder's "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant" could be added to this group which should be supplemented with films on women by women, one of whom is Margarete von Trotta. The Handke film and the novel which he wrote later are of particular interest for a literature class since the author made his well-known distrust of language as a viable means of communication the topic of the "Left-Handed Woman." The protagonist leaves her husband and her traditional role without explanation and demonstrates throughout the impotence of language to solve problems on any level of human relationships. Two Schlöndorff films, „Törless," 1966, his earliest, and "Tin Drum," 1981, followed, both discussed earlier. We will conclude our New German Cinema course with two films by Werner Herzog, often bizarre and always dazzling in his photography, "Aguirre, Wrath of God," 1972, and „Fitzcarraldo," 1982.--In addition to the films suggested here and others like them, there is a series called "Filmed Literature: Great authors reflect on the society of their era." These are made for TV and available from the West German Embassy. They are very well suited to supplement period, genre or survey of literature courses.--In conclusion: it is comforting to know that there is far more outstanding material available than we will ever be able to use.

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